



Finding the Law on the Internet, Federal and State Materials

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Finding the Law on the Internet

Many academic sites feature research guides or other commentaries on how to find topical or jurisdictional law on the Internet. Some of these are more substantial than others. An easy way to find these materials is to put topical terms in a search engine and add the words "LibGuides" to the search. Academic law libraries now publish topical research guides on their sites called LibGuides. For example, the search [libguide legislative history] brings up multiple results such as:

Federal Legislative History

libguides.law.ucla.edu/federallegislativehistory

UCLA School of Law

A description for this result is not available because of this site's robots.txt – learn more.

[Federal Legislative History Research - LibGuides at ...](#)

wcl.american.libguides.com/legislative_history

What Is a **Legislative History**? A **legislative history** is a compilation of documents produced at each stage of the legislative (congressional) process.

[Introduction - Federal Legislative History - LibGuides at ...](#)

guides.lib.unc.edu/fedleghistory

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Dec 8, 2015 - Documents produced during the creation of legislation constitute "**legislative history**." Disputes over the meaning or application of a statute can ...

[General Introduction - Legislative History--Federal ...](#)

researchguides.lawnet.fordham.edu/legislativehistory

Fordham University

Dec 5, 2013 - Finding **legislative history** can be challenging but is easier if you go about it systematically. This **libguide** provides a step-by-step procedure for ...

Adding California, for example, would produce links to LibGuides featuring details on California legislative history. One of the more interesting LibGuides when it comes to legislative history is the *State Legislative History Research Guides Inventory*: *An index of state legislatures and online legislative history research guides*. It comes from the Jerome Hall Library at Indiana University in Bloomington and it features links to legislative history guides for all 50 states. This is the kind of content is now typically published by law librarians. Some of the content refers back to books in the collection or subscription databases. Nonetheless, this information is useful. If one is looking for

Massachusetts transactional forms, a LibGuide will identify sources for those forms. LibGuides are now indexed in Google Scholar in addition to general web search.

Federal and state materials on the Internet

The most basic form of organization for primary legal documents on the web is by jurisdiction. Virtually every federal governmental entity has a web presence. Every state has a web site. Every major municipality has a web site, as do a large number of small communities. The web is no longer exotic territory even to small governmental units. The variety of materials—cases, laws, administrative documents, etc.—depends on the creativity of the entity. The trend is to place at least heavily requested documents online. The advantage to governments is that it cuts down on the amount of printed copies while still widely disseminating information to the public. An experienced researcher develops the knowledge of what types of documents will likely be available at sites representing different levels of government.

The federal government has placed an incredible volume of documents online. The collection ranges in time generally from 1995 to the present, though there are archives of some materials that begin earlier in time.

State web sites generally cover all three branches of government. The standard URL to access a state web site had been <http://www.state.xx.us> where the “xx” is replaced by the postal code of the state. This address scheme still works, though the researcher will be redirected to a URL that looks more like www.xxxxxxxx.gov, where the “xxxxxxx” is replaced by the name of the state in one form or another (e.g. www.newjersey.gov, or for North Dakota <http://www.nd.gov/>). The address ending in .gov is now the preferred format for the address to the official site of the state.

Case collections, dockets, court rules, and court web sites

Every federal court is represented on the Internet. The main site for the Judiciary of the United States is [UScourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov). This includes links to all of the District Courts (trial courts), the Circuit Courts of Appeal, the [United States Supreme Court](http://www.supremecourt.gov), specialized courts such as the [United States Tax Court](http://www.ustaxcourt.gov), the [U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces](http://www.uscourts.gov), and others. General information available on all of these sites includes links to the federal rules sets, local and circuit rules, location information, and contact information. Many (though not all) federal court sites include docket listings, opinions, briefs, and some such as the Seventh and Ninth Circuits include oral arguments in MP3 format. Local courts tend to be forthcoming with procedural information, forms, and other information relating to conducting business at the Court.

Documents filed in court are available through a subscription service called PACER which is managed by the Judicial Conference of the United States. The charge is 10 cents per page with a cap of approximately \$2 per document. PACER offers electronic access to

any docketed case currently in the court system. A researcher can download all available documents. Typically transcripts appear in the docket lists but not always downloadable. Documents under seal are not available nor are un-redacted documents. The archive of cases goes as far back as 2000. As noted earlier, free access to PACER is available in federal court libraries. Otherwise access is limited to subscribers. As noted earlier, Justia is trying to create a free alternative to PACER.

Statutes, codes, and municipal ordinances

The official United States Code is available in compilations starting in 1994 to the present at [FDsys](#), the replacement for GPO Access. Another copy of the current code which can be downloaded by title, chapter or section is located at the web site for the [Office of the Law Revision Counsel](#). This office is part of the [House of Representatives](#) and is charged with editing the official text of the code for publication. Federal executive documents are available through links in GPO Access, the White House web site, and individual federal agency web sites. PDF versions of the [Federal Register](#) and the [Code of Federal Regulations](#) starting with editions published in the mid 90's are also at FDsys.

Another feature of the site is the authentication of documents presented there that identifies them as in the form issued by the Superintendent of Documents. PDF documents from the site contain an unalterable header that vouches for the document content and presumably changes or disappears if the document is altered.

GPO Access had been the main site for federal government documents in the past. It is now retired. FDsys is designed to be more consumer friendly with more options to search and browse government documents. Court opinions, for example, were never available at GPO Access but are available on FDsys.gov. Access through this site for opinions may make the need for a PACER subscription unnecessary at some point. This is, however, a new feature and only includes a small number of the federal courts as of now. The Government Printing Office is now offering another site for government documents called [Govinfo](#). It is still in beta and it offers multiple search options for government documents.

All states have placed their statutory and administrative codes online in one form or another. This information is usually available via links from the state legislature web site and/or the state agency's web site. Agency decisions are sometimes available, usually from the agency's web site. Another source for state information is [Stateinformation.com](#). It offers an index to state web sites with links to various agencies and departments. Federal agency decisions are collected by the [University of Virginia](#). Click on the link to [Administrative Agency Decisions & Other Actions](#).

There are several substantial sources for municipal ordinances. The first is the municipality's own site. Many municipalities do not publish codes online though they

may be available at no charge through the two major commercial code sites, Municode.com and Sterling Codifiers. Municode.com covers most all states (but not all municipalities within those states). Click on the Code Libraries link to access municipal codes organized by state. Sterling Codifiers cover states from the upper Midwest and all states west of the Mississippi River. Click on the Get Codes option in the upper right portion of the screen to access codes online.

Lexis also publishes municipal codes, though these are usually accessible via links from a municipal web site rather than an aggregated site. About 500 codes previously published by Lexis have been acquired by Municode.com in the last several years.

